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ABSTRACT

Financial problems may be beneficial to certain learning situations because they may provide the teachable moment for educators to gain deeper understandings of alternative curricular practices, such as more extensive use of local resources to provide inexpensive but meaningful learning experiences. Educators must encourage and help students to function at their own levels as citizens in today's world. The curriculum must be life oriented to be meaningful, and it must be developed within available funds to be realistic. Teachers should involve students more in planning activities and in evaluating progress. Students should know why they are asked to undertake a certain study, what information they will gain from a particular experience, and what skills they are improving in and which ones need more work. A teacher may take a simple folk tale like "The Three Bears," which is a free resource, and with thought and careful planning involve students in thinking of other ways to present the tale than just reading and discussing it. Dramatizations, puppets, and flannel board figures may be possible media. Teachers might also be continually on the alert for worthwhile inexpensive learning materials and experiences that may be of interest to children. (SW)

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# LIVING AND LEARNING WITHIN A LIMITED BUDGET

A talk to be presented
at the 61st annual meeting of the
National Council of Teachers of English
Las Vegas, Nevada
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(Perspectives B.1--Financial Support
for the Schools: Revolt of the Taxpayer)

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# LIVING AND LEARNING WITHIN A LIMITED BUDGET

Martha Irwin

Adequate funds to provide quality education for children in all areas of the world is an undisputed need. The resistance, and in some cases inability, of taxpayers to supply more money for schools is equally obvious. Since the financial support is not as great as might be desired, reality dictates that, for the sake of children and society, we must provide the best educational experiences possible within the available budget. How can we meet this challenge?

Some of the most productive responses to the situation occur, it seems, when educators consider the question "What more can we do with what we have?" An underlying assumption is that we have more than we are using. Many valuable resources can be found and many interesting experiences are possible within our immediate environments. These can and should be used to a greater extent--not merely because their use might help us during periods of financial shortages, but more important because they provide the bases for real learnings, learnings that are related to living in an ever-changing world.

Many teachers are responding to the financial challenge by making greater use of the human and physical resources at hand. As they stretch their imaginations to find ways to provide a stimulating learning environment despite limited funds, their

creativity is fostered, and the sense of accomplishment they feel as they see the responses of children serves as an inspiration for them to stretch a little more. The enthusiasm and ingenuity of teachers establishes an atmosphere which inspires children, in turn, to become more creative. If the creativity of the children is tapped by involving them in raising questions, seeking resources, and planning activities related to life in the world around them, expenditures are kept to a minimum and the opportunities for students to develop academic skills and problem-solving abilities in a functional way are virtually limitless.

The human relationships and the process-of-learning skills that could evolve in such a climate may actually be hampered by prescriptive curricular packages and teaching devices. Packaged programs are usually costly, the content is often remote from the lives of children in a local area, and the students are not stimulated to develop their skills in a meaningful context wherein they attend to questions and problems of interest and concern to them. Carefully sequenced programs and accompanying pressures to "cover" them by the end of the term may interfere with the purposeful acquisition of skills and knowledge and can also stifle the development of critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity. Children who are in schools where the latest packages cannot be afforded are not necessarily deprived because of the lack of gimmicks and gadgets. They may, instead, receive immeasurable advantages if they have many opportunities to become more aware of their world and more creative and resourceful in relating to it.

Granted that additional funds might be spent in many other ways than on planned programs and materials, the truth of the matter is that for many schools the money is just not available for any purpose at the moment. But this grave financial problem may have a brighter side. It may provide the teachable moment for educators to gain deeper understandings of alternative curricular practices such as, for example, more extensive use of local resources to provide inexpensive but meaningful learning experiences. Furthermore, the efforts of teachers to make wiser use of natural and human resources within the community and to work within the budget allocations must be given greater recognition.

In this age of accountability, however, the public wants assurance that students will achieve the "basics" regardless of the level of financial support being provided. People need to know that students who are investigating firsthand the effects of daily weather conditions upon our lives will achieve the fundamentals just as well as they will by studying facts and terms from a textbook-oriented program. It is imperative, therefore, that educators be articulate in specifying the behaviors, skills, knowledge, and learning processes that students will acquire as they observe, ask questions, use a variety of media, and try out solutions to problems related to life in their local areas.

As one means of helping students and parents become more cognizant of the kinds of growth being fostered, teachers might involve youth to a greater extent in planning activities and in evaluating prog Students could be guided to consider such

questions as: Why are we undertaking this study? What information are we gaining from this experience that we want to remember? What else would we like to know or what else might we do to try to solve our problem? In what skills are we showing improvement and which ones do we need to work on next? Such evaluations will give students a greater role in curriculum development while helping them realize--and perhaps publicize--the educational outcomes of cooperatively planned studies in which the local area is used as a learning laboratory.

Does it not seem possible, then, that as we economize by making more use of the resources at hand we will also be developing a more appropriate life-oriented curriculum for today's boys and girls? As children and adults become increasingly involved in planning and carrying out purposeful activities in the immediate environment, will we not be taking a positive approach to meeting the problems of financial support and the issues of accountability as well as to effecting some much-needed changes in curriculum? And by exhibiting our willingness and desire to make wise use of community resources and topics that can promote real learnings without additional cost, might we not help to restore the taxpayers' confidence in the schools?

Lest you are inclined to answer those questions negatively at this point, let us hasten to look at some possibilities for putting the ideas into operation. Consider, for example, the use of a simple folk tale, which by its very nature is a free resource. With a little thought and planning, teachers can help children acquire a great many more learnings than are customarily

gained by merely telling the story, although the latter procedure certainly has a valid place in the school program, too.

Mary, a teacher who was familiar with Rojankovsky's delightful illustrations in The Three Bears[1], was disappointed with the characterizations of Goldilocks, the bears, and the furniture in the workbook she was supposed to use. She felt, too, that the stated goals for the lesson--to foster interest in folk stories and to develop sequential thinking abilities--were very limited and that the teaching suggestions were quite routine. As she thought about the skills her children needed and pondered about how those skills might be learned through the use of this familiar tale, Mary began to jot down notes about objectives and corresponding activities. Other teachers became interested and were soon contributing their ideas. The contagion of interest led this group of teachers to develop a simple resource unit around the theme in which they listed many possible objectives, sub-themes, activities, resources, and evaluation techniques. The suggestions from this bank of ideas provided the impetus for the evolution of several quite different units about bears as some of the teachers planned activities with the children in their own classrooms.

A brief look at Mary's room will show what happened with one group of youngsters. After Mary told "The Three Bears" in her best storytelling manner, she encouraged the boys and girls

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[1] The Three Bears, illustrated by F. Rojankovsky (New York: Golden Press, Inc., 1948).

to think of other ways to present the tale. Dramatizations, puppets, and flannel board figures were suggested as possible media. Small groups of six- and seven-year-olds engaged in problem-solving as they decided which media they would use, who would make each of the figures or props, how large Mama Bear must be to be middle-sized, and who would be the voice for each character in the presentation.

The concept of "porridge" was clarified by consulting the dictionary (with the teacher's help), by asking mothers for recipes, and finally by cooking some of this unusual bears' food so that it could be sampled by many of the "pretend bears" in the class. Interested children gained practice in measuring and in following directions as they stirred up their concoctions in the school kitchen with a mother's help. Having some porridge readily available made it possible for some of the youngsters to assess the accuracy of the story's contention that Mama Bear's serving was too cold and Papa's larger portion was too hot, but Baby's smaller one was just right.

As the children became acquainted with more bears in other stories that Mary read to them, they came to realize that the "biggest bear" in Lynd Ward's book[2] and the bears in Blueberries for Sal[3] have different personalities, are non-talkers, and eat foods other than porridge. To find out what bears really do

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[2]Lynd Ward, The Biggest Bear (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952).

[3]Robert McCloskey, Blueberries for Sal (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1948).

eat, the youngsters looked for the frames about foods in a science filmstrip about bears, listened for pertinent information in an encyclopedia article read by the teacher, and summarized their findings in an informational chart.

By looking at illustrations of bears in several sources (the books, the filmstrip, the encyclopedia, and their own creations), the children were developing greater perceptual awareness and aesthetic sensitivity. They also chose "bear music" as background for their retellings of the story, and some children even created another adventure of the three bears.

These experiences were carried out by one teacher in a self-contained classroom with more than thirty boys and girls. Mary is successful because she believes that youngsters should and can learn to assume responsibility as they work together, and because activities are carefully planned with them. In addition to a mother to help with the cooking, other local people could assist for short periods of time on different phases of the study. The librarian and the school music teacher would be good resources when children are seeking additional stories about bears or appropriate musical selections for special effects. The services of these special teachers are much more valuable as consultants to teachers and students than as scheduled "lesson-givers." A retired senior citizen, the school principal, or an older student could assist small groups of children by reading stories to them or by helping them search for answers to their questions about bears' eating habits. An

afternoon of voluntary participation by any or all of these resource people in the classroom will benefit the children and, equally important, can promote greater understanding of the total educational program if the person is included in the planning or is at least aware of the purposes that have led to his involvement. The use of resource people from the community serves not only to help educators face some of the problems related to finances and class size, but also creates an opportunity for an alert teacher to plant the seeds for increased public awareness of new directions for meaningful learning.

But back to the bears. The resource unit included many objectives and activities that were not carried out with Mary's students. Can you imagine what some of them might be? Can you conceive of some adaptations for older students? Think of the possibilities, for example, of helping boys and girls develop a greater depth of understanding about the concept of folk literature. A library search for stories from other countries could be instituted. Perhaps students could ask parents, grandparents, and neighbors to tell or to tape record folk tales that they remember. In carrying out these activities children would become aware that people have different recollections and favorites, and could also become alerted to interesting variations of characterizations, settings, and language patterns. A simple investigation like this is one means for promoting sensitivity to human likenesses and differences, thus contributing to multicultural understandings. Such attitudes and values affecting human relationships are acquired through interactions among people; they are not learned from expensive programs and materials.

Perhaps you will suggest that the children in Mary's class could have been taken to see some real bears. That would indeed have been appropriate, but you will recall that we are talking about a limited budget. Field trips with busses are not always possible and, because they are limited in number, so much may be packed into one excursion that the students do not get an in-depth concept of a bear anyway. Children who must hurry to see all of the animals dare not take time to compare the bear's size and shape with other objects, to follow his movements when he is startled or hungry, to see what and how he eats, to look into his sad or happy eyes, or to sense his bear personality. We need not be overly concerned about children missing a trip to the zoo, however, if they are having worthwhile first-hand experiences in the local area--with people and places that can be visited and revisited as needed without costly bus arrangements.

The children in Mary's class learned much information and acquired many skills as they used a minimum of materials--a few books, a filmstrip, some paper to make puppets, and the ingredients for porridge donated by a local grocer. The workbook lesson which served as Mary's original stimulus was never used. This teacher was frustrated not by the lack of materials, but rather by the fact that the money which had gone for workbooks was an unwise expenditure in the first place. How much better it would have been for the funds to have been used for a variety of good children's books, or for a tape recorder that the children could use to evaluate their retellings of the story, or for a simple

camera that would provide photographs to build positive self-concepts and to stimulate language growth.

It is inconceivable that anyone--educator, taxpayer, or even program writer--could feel that failure to use the prescribed materials in the classroom just described has resulted in a disservice to the youngsters or that active learning with a multi-media approach is necessarily haphazard or expensive. As a matter of fact, boys and girls who are in situations wherein prescriptive materials and equipment or segregated remedial classes are believed to be the keys to better education may be grossly cheated if they do not have opportunities like these to develop skills in a meaningful setting, to assume self-direction, and to realize that learning is fun.

Another example of an exciting program not dependent upon an expenditure of funds is drawn from a classroom in England. Although transplanting a program from one place to another, even in the same school district, is inadvisable, ideas can be gleaned from many sources and adapted to a local setting. One teaching pattern that is quite typical in England and that might well be emulated is that of scrounging everywhere for worthwhile learning materials. Continually on the alert for aspects of the local environment that are of interest to children, teachers there are extremely sensitive to opportunities underfoot, around the corner, or literally in the palm of the hand.

In one classroom observed in England, the youngsters were busily engaged in a variety of activities, with several indica-

tions that "hands" was a topic of interest. With just a few minutes observation, visitors could asses that the children had reached a high level of achievement of behaviors related to the goals of planning, pacing, and completing their activities. Furthermore, the difficult problem of individualizing learning was being alleviated without additional cost as each child was able to function at a level and in a manner most comfortable for him. Because the students were actually practicing self-direction and responsibility, the teacher was free to explain to the visitors that the theme "What can we do with our hands?" had arisen from an interest of some of the girls in cutting out silhouettes of their own hands. Before pursuing the interest as a class topic, the teacher had made a flow chart to determine if the theme might offer enough for the development of concepts and skills needed by the students and if it had sufficient possibilities to serve a variety of children's interests. Satisfied in her own mind, the teacher then involved the children in planning some experiences around the theme, initiating the study by asking them what could be done with hands. Many of the children practiced functional language skills as they wrote compositions to accompany the cutouts of their own hands. A home-made "feeling box" provided inspiration to find a variety of words and phrases to describe sensory experiences. The children had thought of hands as related to clocks--a possibility that had not occurred to the teacher. This interest led to a series of activities in which the children acquired some skills in telling time and in putting events in their daily lives into a sequence.

All of this was done at minimal cost, using common experiences and regular school supplies.

Does this theme of "What can we do with our hands?" offer any possibilities for older students? Can you think of some areas for study and can you justify them in terms of potential learnings of content and skills? What inexpensive resources could you and your students find in your local community to develop the topic?

The theme of hands could lead, for example, to an extensive study of occupations, hobbies, and sports. Every person in the community could be a resource as students become adept in interviewing people, compiling data, and interpreting results about skilled and talented hands in the neighborhood. Such a study could easily be expanded into a consideration of public and private employment, mass production, labor and management relations, or the services that would be essential to a self-sustaining community. Local occupations could be studied in relation to the geographic setting, traditions, employment conditions, and interdependence with surrounding areas. If students develop interest in the handshake tradition or in the use of hands as a token of brotherhood, they might launch studies about customs of greeting throughout the world or about pictorial and verbal symbols that affect human relationships. In all of these cases, community resources could supply ample materials for both the content and processes of learning.

Whether you start with your hands, a folk tale, the weather, popcorn, pollution, or politics, or with any topic of concern to

students, every community is replete with learning opportunities that cost little or nothing but that could serve as the basis for a wide range of interesting, worthwhile studies. And if learning in school is to have any bearing on a student's life outside school, the real world must serve as the setting for that learning. This applies to all ages of students and to all of the traditional divisions of knowledge in the school program.

Since daily life draws upon all areas of subject matter, nearly any theme or problem for study could serve your students or your teaching area. Any of the aspects of the study on hands, for example, could be initiated appropriately in a conventional reading, language arts, or social studies period, although none of these areas should be separate subjects for study apart from the totality of human experience. An integrated curriculum is more natural than compartmentalized subjects and is an inevitable result of community-centered studies that evolve through teacher-pupil planning.

All teachers can base their studies on topics or problems of importance to students. This includes teachers who are concerned with a curriculum in which knowledge is interrelated as it is in life as well as those who are assigned, unfortunately, to arbitrary segments of subject matter. All of these educators should contemplate the possibilities for pertinent, inexpensive explorations with local resources. Within the school grounds, for example, students could investigate sounds, textures, wheels, tools, electricity, personnel, services, or power figures. A short distance beyond the school itself, the immediate neighbor-

hood has many potential themes including: types of housing, businesses and industries, religious and welfare organizations, recreational facilities, the effects of television and other mass media upon our lives, and geographic or ethnic backgrounds and multicultural values. What possibilities exist in your area?

As students become more aware of the facets of life around them, perhaps they can go beyond discovering and describing what the community is like and can begin to grapple with some real problems such as: How can we make our neighborhood more attractive? How can we make our school a better place in which to learn? How can we make our community a better place in which to live? Perhaps, even, how can we move toward a world community?[4]

Despite the state of the finances, educational programs must allow and encourage students to function at their own levels as citizens in today's world. Just as the curriculum must be life-oriented to be meaningful, it must be developed within the available funds to be realistic. A community-centered curriculum based upon local resources and problems seems to offer some exciting prospects for improved living and learning in our space-age society. The potential outcomes are priceless, and the steps toward them can be initiated even within a limited budget.

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[4]For a more detailed look at the possibilities for a community-centered curriculum, see Martha Irwin and Wilma Russell, The Community Is the Classroom (Midland, Michigan: Pendell Publishing Company, 1971).